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SUBJECT: BHUTANESE CHARGE HUMS AN OLD REFRAIN ON BHUTANESE

REFUGEES

1. (SBU) PRM DAS David Robinson met Bhutan's Charge d'Affaires Kinga Singye on September 4 to discuss Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Robinson reported on the excellent progress of third-country resettlement of Bhutanese refugees from Nepal and his own recent visit to Bhutanese refugees successfully resettled in Iowa. Robinson then reminded Singye that, although the U.S. is pleased with the progress of the resettlement program, the U.S. also strongly supports the refugees' aspirations to return home.

2. (SBU) Singye responded that Bhutan remained ready to sit with Nepal for further discussion on "agreements we have reached." Singye claimed it was only Nepal's unreliability that stood in the way of further meetings, noting that a meeting between foreign ministers at the recent Non-Aligned Movement summit was canceled when Nepal backed out at the last moment. Singye went on to reiterate Bhutan's long-held positions: the refugees were not really refugees but illegal immigrants; the problem only existed because the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) set up the camps to support the refugees; violent groups from the camps continued to launch attacks against Bhutan (although when pressed for recent examples, Singye could not give any); and negotiations with Nepal's weak and unreliable government were impossible.

3. (SBU) Singye went on to describe for DAS Robinson the results of the 2003 joint assessment by Bhutan and Nepal of the population of Khudunabari camp. The people from that sample population fell into four groups: Category one (2.4 percent of the camp's population), who seemed to have a valid claim to Bhutanese citizenship; category two, "voluntary migrants" who might have a claim after further investigation; category three, which Singye described as both Nepalis and Indians claiming to be Bhutanese; and category four, comprised of "criminals."

4. (SBU) Robinson asked Singye why the individuals from the first category who had a recognized claim to Bhutanese citizenship could not return. Singye replied that the individuals needed to be "verified" by the Government of Nepal, a process Singye reiterated would be impossible with Nepal's current government. Robinson asked if Bhutan had consular access to these citizens. Singye seemed to be disconcerted by the question but said that access was not necessary since UNHCR takes care of everyone in the camps. When asked whether Bhutan

would still consider individuals for repatriation from the first category, Singye confirmed that Bhutan would in principle accept them but said the individuals would still need to be verified. When pressed further for a mechanism for resettled individuals to pursue their claims (such as forwarding citizenship claims to Bhutan's Missions to the UN in New York and Geneva), Singye at first demurred, then said weakly that perhaps Bhutan's Mission to New York could forward claims from refugees in the U.S. to Thimpu for verification.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: All rhetoric to the contrary aside, it was clear during the meeting that Bhutan remains, at least for now, firmly opposed to repatriation. To make clear that the USG firmly supports repatriation as well as resettlement, we recommend that support for repatriation be a priority talking point in USG interactions with the Government of Bhutan.
End Comment.
ROEMER